

## PLAYING BY THE RULES: GENDER ROLES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

The concept of gender roles is socially constructed and refers to behaviour and characteristics considered to be appropriate for men and women. Many researchers believe that an understanding and acceptance of gender roles begins at an early age, and that parents and caregivers play a key role in helping to shape and model the gender roles that their children will learn. A sense of gender grows and evolves over a lifetime and is influenced by a number of factors. In early childhood, gender roles begin to form and will affect a child's behaviour, interaction with peers, and choice of toys and activities. In this issue of Check the Research, we consider some recent studies that have examined the emergence of gender typed behaviour and attitudes among young children.

**"GENDER-ROLE ATTITUDES REFER TO BELIEFS ABOUT APPROPRIATE ROLES FOR MALES AND FEMALES, WHICH ARE CONSIDERED TO BE PERVASIVE IN HUMAN SOCIETY AND BEGIN TO DEVELOP EARLY IN CHILDHOOD."**

(Kingsbury & Coplan, 2012, p. 506)

### GENDER-TYPED PREFERENCES AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN

Children as young as 12 to 24 months may begin to display gender typed preferences for toys and activities. At this early age, the preference is often limited to only a few toys such as balls and blocks for boys, and dolls and doll clothes for girls. As children grow older, their gender typed preferences widen to include a broader range of toys and activities. Between the ages of 3 and 5, many boys show a preference for cars, trucks, balls, blocks and riding toys while girls often prefer dolls, domestic based toys, dress-up, and artistic activities (Goble, Martin, Hanish, & Fabes, 2012).

As young children develop their concepts of gender, they go through a period of being quite inflexible about their choice of toys and interests. Up until the age of 7 or 8, studies have noted that children have very definite ideas about what is considered appropriate for boys and girls (Trautner et al., 2005). Past this age, they begin to accept that boys and girls may share similarities and their concepts of gender appropriate behaviour and interests become more flexible.

### GENDER TYPED BEHAVIOUR AND PARENTAL ATTITUDES

Kane (2006) conducted interviews with 42 parents of preschool aged children (3 to 5 years) to explore their view of children's gendered behaviour and attributes. Participants were diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic background, and sexual orientation. Kane questioned parents about their children's clothing, toys, and general behaviour in an effort to understand the gender expectations that they had for their children, as well as to explore how parents responded to the idea of gender nonconformity.

Kane's (2006) findings indicated that the fathers were more likely to support clearly defined gender roles for boys and girls than were the mothers, who tended to be more flexible with their concepts of appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. Fathers were also more conscious of maintaining stricter gender boundaries for their sons than for their daughters.

Kane (2006) also found that both mothers and fathers were generally comfortable with gender nonconformity among daughters, and often encouraged it by buying boys' toys, and fostering an interest in football, fishing and the use of tools. Some parents commented on being proud that their daughters exhibited masculine characteristics that were not stereotypically female.



"I NEVER WANTED A GIRL WHO WAS A LITTLE PRINCESS, WHO WAS SO FRAGILE...I WANT HER TO TAKE ON MORE MASCULINE CHARACTERISTICS."

"I DON'T WANT HER JUST TO COLOR AND PLAY WITH DOLLS, I WANT HER TO BE ATHLETIC."

(Comments from parents of daughters cited in Kane, 2006, p.157)

However, Kane (2006) also found that other parents expressed concern when their sons were interested in girls' toys, or displayed behaviour considered to be stereotypically female. Examples of behaviours that were particularly concerning for parents of boys were the wearing of skirts and dresses, using nail polish, playing with Barbie dolls, and showing an interest in dance, particularly ballet.

"HE'S ASKED ABOUT WEARING GIRL CLOTHES BEFORE, AND I SAID NO...HE LIKES PINK, AND I TRY NOT TO ENCOURAGE HIM TO LIKE PINK JUST BECAUSE, YOU KNOW, HE'S NOT A GIRL...THERE'S NOT MANY TOYS I WOULDN'T GET HIM, EXCEPT BARBIE, I WOULD TRY NOT TO ENCOURAGE THAT."

(Comments from a mother of a son, cited in Kane, 2006, p. 160)

There were 17 mothers of sons in the Kane (2006) study, and 11 of these mothers were worried about the reactions and opinions of others if their sons displayed non-masculine behaviour and interests. The five lesbian and gay parents were also very conscious of how their sons would be judged by others if they did not appear to be masculine. Many parents of sons discouraged their children from displaying excessive emotion (i.e. crying when hurt) or passivity. Some also expressed concern that certain interests and behaviour might indicate a non-heterosexual orientation. This tendency to equate early interest in certain toys and behaviour with sexual orientation was not seen among parents of daughters.

"IF HE WAS ACTING FEMININE, I WOULD ASK AND GET CONCERNED...I WOULD TRY TO GET INVOLVED AND MAKE SURE HE'S NOT GAY."

(Comment from mother of son, cited in Kane, 2006, p. 162)

"THERE ARE THINGS THAT ARE MEANT FOR GIRLS, BUT WHY WOULD IT BE BAD FOR HIM TO HAVE ONE OF THEM? I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE I HAVE SOME DEEP, DEEP, DEEP BURIED FEAR THAT...HIS SEXUAL ORIENTATION MAY GET SCREWED UP."

(Comment from father of son, cited in Kane, 2006, p. 162-163)

Kane (2006) noted that many parents felt that they needed to shape their son's masculinity and that their parental attention was needed to achieve gender conformity for boys. This attitude was not seen in relation to daughters. While parents encouraged some typically feminine qualities and pursuits for their sons (i.e. nurturance, compassion, domesticity), many drew the line at more iconic feminine behaviour, such as an interest in dance, playing with Barbies, and passivity. Twenty-one of the 42 parents interviewed had positive comments about their sons' display of domestic, nurturing and compassionate behaviour (i.e. playing with dolls, tea sets, kitchen centres), however, these interests were generally seen as being gender neutral rather than strictly feminine. Kane also noted a disturbing tendency among some parents to belittle or devalue certain feminine interests and attributes, which in turn sends a message to both boys and girls that masculine interests and characteristics are more valued by society.



## GENDER AND SHYNESS AND AGGRESSION

Canadian researchers Kingsbury and Coplan (2012) interviewed 78 mothers of preschoolers aged 27 -72 months to find out if the gender-role attitudes of the women affected their reactions to certain behaviours of their children. Mothers were recruited from a day care centre in a mid-sized Ontario city and were asked to fill out questionnaires which presented 2 different hypothetical situations. In one situation children exhibited shy behaviour and in the other situation they exhibited aggressive behaviour. The mothers were then questioned about their emotional responses to the situations and were asked about the problems or benefits associated with each behaviour.

The mothers reported more negative consequences and fewer positive consequences related to situations depicting aggressive behaviour, for both boys and girls. They also expressed more concern about the consequences of aggressive behaviour for their sons than for their daughters. Mothers with traditional gender role beliefs expressed more concern about shy behaviour among boys than shy behaviour among girls. Those mothers who held flexible gender-role attitudes tended to be more accepting of shyness among boys.

Kingsbury and Coplan (2012) noted that parents were often more accepting of displays of physical aggression among boys than among girls. Boys are exposed to the concept of aggression through masculine role models in professional sports and popular culture (i.e. comic books, super-heroes, action figures, etc.), which may help to affirm their aggressive behaviour to some extent (Messner, 2000). Shyness is generally more socially acceptable for girls than for boys in western society. Kingsbury and Coplan point out that shyness is often equated with fear and anxiety. These emotions are equated with femininity which may explain why shyness is more of a concern for parents of boys than for parents of girls.

## GENDER-TYPED SELECTION OF TOYS AND ACTIVITIES

Young children's choice of toys and activities generally reveals a predictable pattern of gender appropriate preferences. In a study of 264 preschool children aged from 37 to 60 months, American researchers looked at the children's choice of gender-typed activities in various situations (Goble, Martin, Hanish, & Fabes, 2012). The children tended to play with gender-typed toys when playing by themselves, however, while this was solitary play, it was within the setting of daycare with peers and teachers present, but not engaged in play. The authors noted that children exhibit more gender typical behaviour in the company of other children since they behave in ways expected of them by their peers. During solitary play, girls were just as likely to play with gender neutral toys as to play with feminine ones, however boys almost exclusively played with masculine toys. When playing with boys, girls played with more male typed toys and activities. Boys would play with more feminine activities and toys when interacting with teachers, but not when playing with girls.

In a study of 98 Jewish boys and girls from a large Israeli city, ranging in age from 4 to 8 years, researcher Karniol (2011) presented children with a choice of two colouring books. One had a stereotypical female cover (i.e. Bratz doll) in a stereotypical male colour (blue) while another had a pink Batman on the cover. Each booklet had 3 pictures, an action figure, a fairy, and 5 stars. Children were given 8 crayons, and told to colour all pictures. Most boys and girls chose booklets with gender stereotypical characters on the cover. The colour of the character on the cover did not influence their choice as much as did the content of the picture. Over 20% of the boys in the study did not colour the fairy, which the authors speculate may indicate reluctance on the part of the boys to be associated with anything considered to be feminine. Both boys and girls used a range of colours to colour the figure stereotypically associated with their own gender, however they were more restrictive in use of colours for figures associated with the other gender. Many boys also avoided the use of female associated colours, especially pink, for any colouring, and both boys and girls tended not to use female colours to colour the male figure. The study shows a greater inflexibility on the part of boys in their choice of colours, but also a tendency on the part of all children to choose gender typed colours and figures. The young children



in the study displayed very clear ideas of what colours and images they perceived to be appropriate for each gender (Karniol).

## WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Children develop a concept of socially constructed gender roles at an early age. This understanding of what is considered to be gender appropriate behaviour for boys and girls is evident through their play, their interaction with other children, and their choice of toys and activities. Parents and caregivers model their own concepts of gender roles for children. Research shows that young children often display very rigid ideas of gender appropriate behaviour and interests and that they become more accepting of nonconforming gender roles as they mature.

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